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Security Council

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5859th meeting

Tuesday, 25 March 2008, 10 a.m.

New York

President:	Mr. Churkin	(Russian Federation)
Members:	Belgium	Mr. Verbeke
	Burkina Faso	Mr. Kafando
	China	Mr. Liu Zhenmin
	Costa Rica	Mr. Urbina
	Croatia	Mr. Jurica
	France	Mr. Ripert
	Indonesia	Mr. Natalegawa
	Italy	Mr. Spatafora
	Libyan Arab Jamahiriya	Mr. Ettalhi
	Panama	Mr. Arias
	South Africa	Mr. Kumalo
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	Sir John Sawers
	United States of America	Mr. Khalilzad
	Viet Nam	Mr. Le Luong Minh

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

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The meeting was called to order at 10.05 a.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

The President (*spoke in Russian*): I should like to inform the Council that I have received letters from the representatives of Cuba, Israel, Lebanon, Pakistan, Slovenia, the Sudan and the Syrian Arab Republic in which they request to be invited to participate in the consideration of the item on the Council's agenda. In conformity with the usual practice, I propose, with the consent of the Council, to invite those representatives to participate in the consideration of the item, without the right to vote, in accordance with the relevant provisions of the Charter and rule 37 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure.

There being no objection, it is so decided.

At the invitation of the President, Mr. Gillerman (Israel) took a seat at the Council table; the representatives of the other aforementioned countries took the seats reserved for them at the side of the Council Chamber.

The President (*spoke in Russian*): I should like to inform the Council that I have received a letter dated 19 March 2008 from the Permanent Observer of Palestine to the United Nations, which will be issued as document S/2008/184 and which reads as follows:

> "I have the honour to request that, in accordance with its previous practice, the Security Council invite the Permanent Observer of Palestine to the United Nations to participate in the meeting of the Security Council which will be held on Tuesday, 25 March 2008, regarding the situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question."

I propose, with the consent of the Council, to invite the Permanent Observer of Palestine to participate in the meeting, in accordance with the provisional rules of procedure and previous practice in this regard.

There being no objection, it is so decided.

At the invitation of the President, Mr. Mansour (Palestine) took a seat at the Council table.

The President (*spoke in Russian*): I welcome the presence of the Secretary-General, His Excellency Mr. Ban Ki-moon, at this meeting and give him the floor.

The Secretary-General: I am grateful for this opportunity to address the Council on what is undoubtedly one of the most important items on its agenda and on mine: the situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question.

Three weeks ago, I briefed you on the tragic developments then under way in Gaza and southern Israel. While I am glad that the violence has abated somewhat since then, tensions remain high. I am deeply concerned about the prospect of renewed violence and what that would mean for both the civilian populations in the conflict zone and for the peace process we are all trying to advance.

Despite many difficulties on the ground, difficulties that must be addressed, I commend the commitment of President Abbas and Prime Minister Olmert to the political process. I am personally and profoundly committed to supporting this process in every way I can and I admire both leaders for their tenacity in the face of much scepticism.

Let us remember that negotiations are the only means to achieve the legitimate Palestinian aspirations to an end to occupation and independent sovereign statehood and legitimate Israeli aspirations for sustainable security and an end to conflict.

At Annapolis, the international community bore witness and expressed its support as Israeli and Palestinian leaders set themselves the target of reaching an agreement by the end of the year. It is my hope that we can achieve this ambitious goal. I believe that all of us must ask ourselves and the parties two simple questions. If not this, what? If not now, when?

This process is too important to be allowed to lose momentum through inaction or indifference, or to be overwhelmed by violence. It is essential that it receive the support of the international community, including this Council.

I remain personally determined and committed to working towards peace within the framework agreed upon: an end to the occupation that began in 1967, based on the foundations of the Madrid Conference, the principle of land for peace, Security Council resolutions 242 (1967), 338 (1973), 1397 (2002) and

1515 (2003) and the Arab Peace Initiative. This framework will lead to an end of conflict, the creation of a Palestinian State, living side by side in peace and security with Israel, and a comprehensive regional peace. I assure the Council that my senior advisers and myself are making unceasing efforts to press forward this agenda in all contacts and forums available to us, including dialogue with the parties and the regional parties, the Quartet and, of course, this Council itself.

Mr. Pascoe, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, will now report on the developments that have taken place over the past month.

The President (*spoke in Russian*): In accordance with the understanding reached in the Council's prior consultations, I shall take it that the Security Council agrees to extend an invitation under rule 39 of its provisional rules of procedure to Mr. Lynn Pascoe, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs.

It is so decided.

The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda.

The Council is meeting in accordance with the understanding reached in its prior consultations.

At this meeting, the Security Council will hear a briefing by Mr. Lynn Pascoe, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs.

I now give the floor to Mr. Pascoe.

Mr. Pascoe: Since the last monthly briefing to the Security Council, I regret that the continuing efforts to advance the political process were once again overshadowed by violence, high numbers of civilian casualties and a lack of concrete improvements on the ground.

The reporting period saw major escalations in violence, with a heavy Israeli air and land military assault in Gaza; the firing of rockets and mortars at Israel — over 390 during the reporting period — including the use this month of longer-range rockets; an attack on a Jewish school in West Jerusalem; Israel Defense Forces (IDF) operations throughout the West Bank targeting alleged militants; and clashes between the IDF and protesting Palestinians in West Bank cities, including in East Jerusalem. In total, 124 Palestinians, including 36 children, were killed in IDF operations, and 359 were injured. Thirteen Israelis, including 4 children, were killed by Palestinian militants, and 55 were injured. Tensions remain high, despite an observable reduction in violence in and around Gaza in the past few weeks.

The Council will recall that when it met in emergency session on 1 March, the violence in and around Gaza was at its height. IDF operation Hot Winter lasted five days and caused dozens of civilian casualties, including the deaths of 31 children, while Hamas rocket attacks extended as far as the Israeli city of Ashkelon, bringing nearly a quarter of a million Israeli civilians within rocket range of Gaza. The Secretary-General condemned the excessive and disproportionate use of force and the killing of civilians and also condemned indiscriminate rocket fire and called for an immediate cessation of such rocket attacks. We reiterate that all parties must comply with international humanitarian law. Regrettably, no party has conducted law-based, independent, transparent and accessible investigations into the killings of civilians and other human rights violations, made the findings public and held perpetrators accountable, as called for by the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

Since that briefing, violence has also spread to Jerusalem and the West Bank. On 2 March, a Palestinian child was shot and killed by the IDF during a protest against the situation in Gaza. On 6 March, eight Israeli students, including four children, were killed in a savage shooting attack at a Jewish seminary in West Jerusalem by a Palestinian from East Jerusalem. That was the first major attack in Jerusalem in almost four years and was strongly condemned by the Secretary-General. On 16 March, dozens of Israelis rioted in the neighbourhood of the killer's home in East Jerusalem. The stabbing of an Israeli in the Old City on 18 March further contributed to the tense atmosphere.

During the reporting period, IDF incursions took place in several West Bank towns, resulting in the arrests of dozens of Palestinians for alleged militant activity. In two separate incidents targeting Islamic Jihad on 12 March, four militants were killed in Bethlehem and another militant was killed in Tulkarem. These incidents were followed by a barrage of rockets fired by Islamic Jihad from Gaza into southern Israel.

We support Egyptian efforts to bring about a cessation of violence, particularly in Gaza, and to facilitate a gradual reopening of crossings into Gaza in coordination with the parties. In this regard, we have

taken note of the recent reduction in violence in and around Gaza and the more regular import of supplies across the crossings. That is a positive but extremely fragile development. We are acutely conscious of the potential for even more deadly episodes of violence to occur very quickly and of the danger that that poses for the security of the Palestinians, Israel and Egypt and for the political process. We urge all parties to act with a sense of responsibility and to cooperate with the Egyptian efforts. We also welcome Egyptian efforts to complete construction of a new border boundary. We encourage intensified cooperation among relevant parties to ensure that legitimate traffic into and out of Gaza at all crossing points takes place, and that concerns regarding alleged smuggling are addressed.

The humanitarian situation in Gaza remains of grave concern, although there has been an improvement in the volume of goods entering the Strip. In the past month, over 1,400 trucks have crossed into Gaza, 95 per cent of them carrying commercial supplies of basic items. That is an improvement from previous months, and we hope for further easing in the near future. Fuel imports have continued to enter from Israel, although shortages remain in key sectors such as health. On any given day between 30 and 50 per cent of ambulances cannot be used due to lack of fuel. Sanitation authorities continue to dump 60,000 cubic metres of raw and partially treated sewage into the sea each day as a result of fuel, electrical and spare parts shortages. Fuel shortages have prevented 63 per cent of Gaza's regular fishing trips, further exacerbating what is already a dire socio-economic scenario. Food insecurity is increasing as salaries dry up, and at least 50,000 additional beneficiaries have been added to food assistance distribution lists.

We also note that the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has still not gained access to captured Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit, and that one of the more than 10,000 Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails died earlier this month, bringing the number of Palestinian prisoners who have died in Israeli prisons to seven since the beginning of 2007.

In the West Bank, 580 IDF-imposed obstacles continue to block Palestinian movement. The levels of restrictions, in both quantity and character, have steadily increased each year since 2005, and are at the root of Palestinian economic decline. The restrictions have continued despite the security efforts of the Palestinian Authority since mid-2007. Recent International Monetary Fund (IMF) projections show that under current conditions gross domestic product (GDP) growth in 2008 will not exceed population growth. Action to ease closure inside the West Bank is essential if a viable Palestinian economy is to develop as the basis for a viable Palestinian State.

In addition to restrictions on Palestinian movement, restrictions of movement of United Nations staff in the West Bank and between the West Bank and East Jerusalem also continue to increase, making delivery of programmes increasingly difficult.

Israeli settlement activity has continued in the reporting period in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. Tenders and construction permits for hundreds of housing units were announced this month, and construction continues in many settlements as well as on infrastructure such as roads for settler use. The Israeli Government stated publicly that settlement expansion in East Jerusalem will continue.

The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) has raised concerns about Israeli archaeological excavations in the Palestinian neighbourhood of Silwan in East Jerusalem, bordering the Haram Al-Sharif/ Temple Mount. The PLO raised additional concerns about alleged plans to bring more Israeli settlers to Ras al-Amud in East Jerusalem while transferring Israeli police personnel to the police station constructed at the centre of the proposed E-1 settlement area between Israel and the settlement of Ma'ale Adumim to the east.

All settlement activity in East Jerusalem or elsewhere in the West Bank is contrary to international law and Security Council resolutions. Israel's failure to cease settlement activity including natural growth or to dismantle the outposts erected after March 2001 is contrary to the Road Map. The Secretary-General has made public his concerns that urgent action must be taken on this issue.

Construction work on the barrier continues within occupied Palestinian territory, in deviation from the Green Line and contrary to the International Court of Justice advisory opinion. Meanwhile, the number of house demolitions in the West Bank has increased noticeably. Since the beginning of this year, over 100 structures — at least half of them residential — have been demolished, displacing nearly 400 Palestinians.

There is little I am able to report about the state of bilateral negotiations. This is a positive reflection of

the confidentiality that is being maintained, enabling Israeli and Palestinian leaders to be candid in their discussions. As a result of the significant Palestinian casualties in Gaza, Palestinian President Abbas suspended bilateral negotiations with Israel for a period.

However, meetings between the heads of the two negotiating teams resumed recently and the work of a number of technical groups formed between the parties is being pursued. Palestinian Prime Minister Fayyad and a senior official in the Israeli Ministry of Defence also attended the first trilateral meeting on monitoring of the implementation of Phase 1 Road Map commitments, hosted by the United States Lieutenant General Fraser.

We support the continuing reform efforts of the Government of Prime Minister Fayyad. A recent IMF mission confirmed that, despite the difficult environment, impressive financial reform measures have been taken, including the reestablishment of cash control procedures and a new accounting system for fiscal reporting.

The Palestinian Development Plan is still being finalized and will shortly be shared with the international community in order to enlist support. The financing needs for recurrent costs in 2008 stand at $1.7 billion. So far, $1.2 billion have been pledged, and about half of the pledges will be disbursed by the end of March. Hence, there is a shortfall of $500 million for recurrent expenditure.

A meeting of the co-chairs of the Paris donors' conference, Foreign Minister Kouchner of France, Commissioner Ferrero Waldner of the European Commission, Foreign Minister Støhre of Norway and Quartet Representative Tony Blair, took place today to assess the situation since the Paris Conference. The next meeting of the Ad-Hoc Liaison Committee will take place on 2 May in London hosted by the United Kingdom and Norway.

Efforts to reform, train and equip the Palestinian security forces in the West Bank continued during the reporting period. Some 1000 officers are currently being trained in Jordan, with the support of the United States Security Coordinator, for deployment in the West Bank in April and May. President Abbas issued a decree aimed at reforming the Palestinian Authority intelligence apparatus. The Interior Minister has submitted a comprehensive report about security in the West Bank. Palestinian security forces have undertaken operations disarming and arresting militants in the West Bank.

However, there is more work to do for the Palestinian Authority to reassert law and order across the cities of the West Bank and meet its Road Map obligations to effectively combat terrorism. If these obligations are to be met, greater Israeli-Palestinian Authority security cooperation is essential.

The Quartet continues to be in close contact at the principal and envoy levels. There are ongoing discussions over the idea of a renewed international meeting in Moscow in the coming period. We are supportive of the idea of such a meeting.

We also continue to stress the vital role of Arab States in support of the peace process, the central importance of the Arab Peace Initiative and the ultimate need for a comprehensive regional peace. Foreign Ministers from the League of Arab States met in Cairo on 5 March ahead of the annual summit planned for 29-30 March in Damascus.

We note their support for the seven-point plan announced by Yemeni President Saleh, calling for a return of the situation in Gaza to the situation before the Hamas takeover in last June, the holding of early elections and a resumption of dialogue on the basis of previous internal Palestinian agreements.

Fatah and Hamas representatives reportedly held constructive discussions on the plan in Sana'a. As a matter of principle, we believe that the unity of the legitimate Palestinian Authority must be restored through peaceful means in support of the political process for a peacefully negotiated two-State solution, and we believe that Arab countries have a leading role to play in supporting such efforts.

The situation in the occupied Syrian Golan has remained quiet over the reporting period, although settlement activity continues.

Lebanon continues in the grip of a deep political crisis. Yesterday, the parliamentary session to elect a President was postponed for the seventeenth time since 24 November 2007.

The Secretary-General firmly supports the Arab League initiative and encourages the parties to facilitate its implementation. The longer the stalemate continues, the greater the chance for the situation to

deteriorate further, both politically and in terms of the security situation.

While the general security atmosphere has remained relatively calm with no major incidents, public tension and anxiety increased during the reporting period. On 16 February, in Beirut, clashes broke out between supporters of various groups affiliated with the majority and the opposition, leaving 20 people injured.

Officials from both sides involved have pledged to cooperate with the Lebanese Armed Forces to avoid the recurrence of such confrontations. Clashes between Fatah and Jund al-Sham erupted on 21 March in the Palestinian refugee camp of Ein el-Hilweh in southern Lebanon leading to one fatality.

The situation within the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) area of operations has remained quiet, although with increased levels of tension. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) have been on a heightened state of alert along the Blue Line since the assassination of Imad Mughniyah on 12 February, and the Lebanese Armed Forces have announced the introduction of specific measures and additional deployment of forces in the event of an attack.

Over the same time period, there has been a considerable increase of IDF violations of Lebanese airspace, with 222 such violations being reported by UNIFIL over a one-week period alone, that is, from 11 to 17 March. These violations constitute a serious breach of Lebanese sovereignty and the Blue Line and undermine the credibility of Lebanese national institutions and UNIFIL.

A UNIFIL investigation also is ongoing into an alleged breach of Lebanese territorial waters. Despite the general increase in tension, all parties have reassured UNIFIL that they do not seek a renewal of hostilities.

With regard to the Palestinian camp of Nahr el-Bared, United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), in cooperation with the Lebanese Army and the office of the Prime Minister, has finalized the Master Plan for the reconstruction of the camp. The reconstruction effort will be a long and complex undertaking that will require the full support of the international donor community.

The fact that the political process between Israelis and Palestinians is continuing is extremely important given the many negative developments that threaten to derail it. The process can only be sustained by much more meaningful efforts to implement Phase I of the Road Map and to improve economic and security conditions. The international community and all regional parties should also give strong support to efforts to bring about a cessation of violence in and around Gaza and a reopening of crossings in an atmosphere in which the security concerns of Palestinians, Israel and Egypt are addressed. Otherwise, the potential for further violence is all too real, with grave consequences for civilians, for regional peace and security, and for the political process itself.

The Secretary-General remains committed to supporting all efforts to secure, through negotiations, the full implementation of the Security Council resolutions on the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The President (*spoke in Russian*): I thank Mr. Pascoe for his briefing.

In accordance with the understanding reached among Council members, I wish to remind all speakers to limit their statements to no more than five minutes in order to enable the Council to carry out its work expeditiously. Delegations with lengthy statements are kindly requested to circulate their text in writing and to deliver a condensed version when speaking in the Chamber.

I now give the floor to the Permanent Observer of Palestine.

Mr. Mansour (Palestine): I would like to start by expressing our gratitude and thanks to the Secretary-General for his participation with us today, for his statement and, above all, for his commitment to doing all he can to end the Israeli occupation begun in 1967 and to allow the two-State solution to see the light of day on the well-known bases he enumerated. Palestine will continue to cooperate with him and with the Security Council to that end.

I would also like to thank Mr. Pascoe for his statement and for the recommendations and conclusions contained therein.

(*spoke in Arabic*)

Once again, I am compelled to convey to the Security Council the recent negative and grave developments in the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem, as a result of the illegal and destructive policies of Israel, the occupying Power. Instead of advancing towards the consolidation of the foundations of a just, permanent and comprehensive peace leading to the conclusion of a peace agreement that paves the way to the establishment of an independent, sovereign, contiguous and viable Palestinian State on the basis of the 1967 borders by the end of this year, the Israeli Government continues deliberately to undermine the simplest achievements made in the interests of peace.

Israel continues to pursue its illegal policies aimed at entrenching its occupation and colonization of the Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem, inter alia through illegal settlement activities, the construction of the wall, the confiscation of land, the imposition of a suffocating siege and collective punishment, brutal military aggression and countless other crimes committed by the Israeli occupying forces and fanatical Israeli settlers against the Palestinian civilian population.

Particularly over the past few weeks, the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem, has witnessed grave developments and a further deterioration and destabilization of the situation, which require the immediate attention of the Security Council. Among those developments have been brutal crimes committed by the occupying forces against Palestinian civilians, including children, particularly in the Gaza Strip, and announcements by the Israeli Government of ongoing plans to expand illegal settlements in the occupied Palestinian territory, especially in and around East Jerusalem.

With regard to the Gaza Strip in particular, following threats made by several Israeli officials to launch large-scale military attacks against the Palestinian people under occupation in the Gaza Strip, including the threat made by the Deputy Defense Minister of Israel to inflict a "holocaust" on the Palestinian population in Gaza, the Israeli occupying forces launched a barbaric military aggression against civilian areas in the northern Gaza Strip on 27 February 2008. The raids and attacks resulted in the deaths of more than 120 Palestinian martyrs, most of them innocent civilians inside their own homes, including more than 25 children and infants and 10 women, and the wounding of more than 300 other civilians. That vicious military campaign lasted for four days, during which Israel used all types of heavy and lethal weaponry to bombard densely populated civilian areas by air, sea and land, causing massive bloodshed and the widespread destruction of public and private property and infrastructure.

Despite the warnings of international bodies and humanitarian organizations of the precarious situation in the Gaza Strip; despite our continuous warnings through successive letters and statements to the Security Council; and despite the appeal made by the Council to the parties to respect their obligations under international law following the emergency meeting of the Council of 1 March 2008, Israel pursued its military campaign in total disregard for all international appeals. In that respect, we must stress the negative ramifications of the Council's inability to adopt a resolution clearly condemning Israel's acts of aggression and calling upon it to cease its flagrant violations of international law, including human rights law and particularly the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which stresses the need to take all necessary and possible measures to ensure the protection of children in armed conflict, as well as international humanitarian law, which, inter alia, in article 33 of the Fourth Geneva Convention, prohibits reprisals against civilians and the imposition of collective punishment on civilian populations.

The pursuit of those attacks deepened the suffering of a people that is already enduring extremely difficult and miserable living conditions as a result of the suffocating siege imposed for many months now by the occupying Power on the Gaza Strip and the ensuing humanitarian and environmental disaster being inflicted upon it.

Those crimes have been continuously justified by Israel, the occupying Power, under the pretexts of security, the right to self-defence and counter-terrorism. In that regard, we reiterate our previously stated position that nothing justifies the killing of children. When the slaughter of innocent children has become acceptable or is somehow sought to be justified under any pretext, we know that we have fully sunk into a dark abyss characterized by the total absence of law, logic, reason, morality, conscience and humanity. When we fail to stand against such brutal

and heinous crimes, we bitterly come to understand that the standards of law and human rights are not applicable equally to all human beings, including children, women, the elderly and the disabled. That perception is dangerously rife among the Palestinian people, who have endured the killing of more than 1,000 children by the Israeli occupying forces since 2000 under the pretext of security.

In that context, it must be stated that security, freedom and basic standards of living are the rights of all peoples without discrimination and are not exclusive to any religion, race, colour or ethnicity. Like all the other peoples of the world, the Palestinian people — its children, women, young people and men — have the right to life and to enjoy prosperity, security and safety. Moreover, they have the right to live in freedom and dignity in their own land, the land of their forefathers, following an occupation that has lasted for more than 40 years and 60 years of exile in refugee camps and diaspora. In accordance with the norms of international law and norms, the Palestinian people also have the right to international protection.

In conformity with the Charter of the United Nations, peace and security are to be achieved through effective collective measures to prevent and eradicate threats to peace and to suppress acts of aggression or other breaches of the peace. We therefore reaffirm the fact that peace and security in our region will be achieved only with the end of Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory. That requires serious steps that will lead to the end of the occupation in all its aspects and make it possible for the Palestinian people to exercise their right to self-determination on the basis of the principle of the equality of the rights of all peoples as enshrined in the Charter.

The hollow security pretext that Israel, the occupying Power, constantly uses and exploits while virtually ignoring its very role as an occupying Power can be summed up in its ongoing pursuit of efforts intended to prolong the occupation and to conceal the expansion of its colonialist settlements and its confiscation of more Palestinian land. What sort of security does Israel hope to achieve by continuing its occupation and colonization of Palestinian land? What kind of security does Israel want to achieve by transforming the land into isolated ghettos, cantons and large prisons?

Israel, the occupying Power, is relentlessly continuing to carry out colonial settlement activities. It is also continuing to build its illegal wall on occupied Palestinian territory, including in and around East Jerusalem. That is a grave and flagrant violation of international law, including the Fourth Geneva Convention, as well as of United Nations resolutions and the advisory opinion issued by the International Court of Justice on 9 July 2004. It is also a violation of its obligations under the Road Map.

In that regard, and in the context of its attempts to create massive physical facts on the ground, immediately following the convening of the Annapolis Conference and the resumption of the peace process, in November 2007, Israel announced the continuation of its illegal expansionist plans to build at least 2,000 new settlement units in occupied East Jerusalem, thereby furthering its illegal efforts to change the character, status and demographic composition of the Holy City and to judaize it. The Israeli Housing Ministry's budget for 2008 includes financing for the building of 500 settlement units in Jebel Abu Ghneim and another 240 units in the Ma'ale Adumim, to the east of Jerusalem. Just two weeks ago, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert announced the approval of the construction of an additional 750 new units in the Geevat Ze'ev settlement, north of East Jerusalem. Plans were also announced for the construction of 400 new settlement units in the Neve Yacub neighbourhood of occupied East Jerusalem. Moreover, the Israeli Prime Minister publicly declared recently that Israel would not stop building settlements on occupied Palestinian territory, especially in East Jerusalem. That is a grave breach of international law that defies the will of the international community and undermines the efforts to revive the peace process.

In reality, the illegal settlement campaign and the peace process clearly cannot coexist. The peace process cannot be separated from the situation on the ground, because all of those actions endanger the continuation of the entire peace process and create even more physical obstructions that must be contended with on the road to achieving a just and lasting peace settlement. They also undermine the future prospects for achieving the two-State solution of Israel and Palestine living side by side in peace and security on the basis of the 1967 borders. That physical affront to the two-State solution has been affirmed by several international bodies and organizations,

including in reports regarding the negative and dangerous impact of ongoing settlement colonization on the future of the peace process. In that regard, the July 2007 report of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) included alarming facts indicating that more than 38 per cent of the area of the West Bank is now occupied by settlements, outposts, military bases, roads and other infrastructure forbidden to Palestinians.

Such successive ongoing illegal measures by Israel, the occupying Power, and the timing of those measures are clearly and intricately correlated — whether they be the intensification of settlement activities in East Jerusalem and the rest of the West Bank, the deliberate repeated attempts by Israel to sabotage security efforts by the Palestinian Authority, the increase, rather than the removal, of checkpoints and roadblocks and the continuation and intensification of its siege of the Gaza Strip and the ongoing aggression against it to isolate it from the West Bank. In addition to the extreme suffering caused to the Palestinian people, all of those actions undermine the role of the Palestinian Authority and damage the peace process, raising serious doubts regarding Israel's intentions and good faith in negotiations while it continues to pursue its illegal and destructive actions and measures.

The killing of Palestinian civilians, the destruction of their properties and infrastructure, the imprisonment of thousands of civilians, the collective punishment, the starvation, the humiliation, the intimidation, the colonization and the other mass violations of human rights are in compatible with peace. They serve to dash hopes and impair the peace process, draining its momentum and credibility. They also severely worsen the situation on the ground, which is already critical at all levels, thereby fuelling the cycle of violence and instability and exclusively serving the agendas of extremists and pushing peace further out of reach. Those violations must be brought to an end. The occupying Power must be held accountable for its crimes and violations and be compelled to abide by all of its legal obligations.

In the light of all of those serious developments, it is incumbent upon the international community, particularly the Security Council, to uphold its responsibilities and take the necessary measures to bring an end to all of those grave Israeli violations and breaches of international law. That includes humanitarian law, and in particular the Fourth Geneva Convention, as well as human rights law and United Nations resolutions. The Council must take urgent and practical measures, including, inter alia, measures prescribed by the Charter, to ensure Israel's scrupulous compliance with all of its obligations under international law and the cessation of its illegal practices, which endanger the international efforts being made to achieve peace through the peace process.

Israel, the occupying Power, should be compelled to completely freeze all of its settlement activities, to rescind its recent decisions, to start dismantling settlement outposts and to take further confidence-building measures to show its seriousness with regard to addressing this critical issue. Such steps are vital to calming and improving the atmosphere, reviving momentum and helping to advance the peace process towards its stated goals.

Moreover, the failure of the Security Council to uphold its responsibilities with regard to the deteriorating and tragic humanitarian situation in the occupied Palestinian territory will only encourage the occupying Power to continue its violations of international law, to continue committing crimes against the Palestinian people with impunity and to continue undermining the fragile peace process in the region. The international community cannot continue to allow the incarceration and suffocation of the entirety of the Palestinian civilian population in the Gaza Strip under the occupying Power's siege. Israel must be compelled to allow for the opening of the Gaza border crossings to permit the movement of persons and goods, including foodstuffs, medical supplies, building materials and other necessary goods, and the unfettered access of the urgently needed humanitarian assistance and personnel to Gaza. In this regard, we reiterate the readiness of the Palestinian Authority to assume responsibility for the Palestine side of the Gaza Strip's border crossings, and we call on Israel to act on that initiative.

The current situation in the Gaza Strip is a human catastrophe, and we cannot remain silent about it. Immediate action must be taken to lift the siege and closure and allow for the movement of persons and goods in order to alleviate the suffering of the civilian population at all levels and in all sectors and to improve conditions on the ground. Such measures are imperative not only from a humanitarian aspect, they

are also imperative from a peace aspect, for no one can expect a people enduring such inhumane and oppressive conditions to even entertain hopes for peace, much less believe in the prospects for peace.

We reiterate that we will continue to resort to the Security Council until it assumes its responsibilities. We will also continue to resort to other organs of the United Nations, including the General Assembly, and other international forums in order to bring an end to the violations and crimes being committed by Israel against the Palestinian people and their inalienable rights, foremost of which are the right to life, the right to self-determination, the right of refugees to return and to find a just solution to their plight in consonance with General Assembly resolution 194 (III), and the right to establish the independent State of Palestine, with its East Jerusalem as its capital — without which there can be no peaceful solution, as Jerusalem is the heart of Palestine.

The road to security passes through the gate of justice and peace. There is no military solution to this conflict. Violence only begets violence, and the continuation of occupation and colonization will ultimately impede any real prospects for realizing a peaceful, just and permanent solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the Arab-Israeli conflict as a whole.

We reaffirm that the attempts to determine the future of our people in the context of cantons and ghettos in a West Bank fragmented by settlements, the Wall, checkpoints and roadblocks, and of the siege of the Gaza Strip and acts of aggression will totally obstruct the attainment of the goal we all strive to achieve — a just, comprehensive and lasting peace.

In conclusion, I reiterate what President Mahmoud Abbas has repeatedly stated: there is a Palestinian partner ready to sit at the negotiating table with a serious Israeli partner to reach a solution based on the resolutions of international legitimacy, the Arab Peace Initiative and the Road Map. We seek a just and permanent solution guaranteeing the flourishing of peace, not a partial, unilateral or temporary solution that will actually prevent the realization of peace in our region. We assure the international community as a whole that we believe in right over might. We remain resolved to protect our rights and to promote our desire for peace. We appeal again to the international community to do its part to help us achieve peace in the Holy Land — peace in the land of peace.

The President (*spoke in Russian*): I now give the floor to the representative of Israel.

Mr. Gillerman (Israel): At the outset, allow me to congratulate you, Mr. President, on your very able stewardship of the Council this month and to thank you for your principled leadership. We are also grateful to the Secretary-General for honouring us with his presence at the opening of this meeting and for his commitment to resolving this issue. I also wish to thank Under-Secretary-General Pascoe for his briefing.

On this note, I just want to make clear that Israel never has acted, and does not act, against so-called alleged militants but against internationally declared and recognized terrorists. I certainly hope the term "alleged militants" is not the United Nations' new definition of terrorism.

The struggle of the moderates against the extremists, which is raging around the world, is the defining challenge of our day. Across the globe, forces of extremism seek to transform resolvable political conflicts into endless religious wars, using all means of violence at their disposal. They fight not for their own rights, but to deprive others of their rights. In our region, Iran — a notorious State sponsor of terrorism — uses proxies such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas among the Palestinians to draw the moderates into a cosmic battle, where victory is not about achievement but about total annihilation.

The very ideology of the extremists makes a dialogue with them impossible. That is why Israel, along with other, like-minded States, understands that dealing with extremists is indeed a zero-sum equation. In contrast, negotiations with the moderates, as Israel is doing with a moderate Palestinian Authority leadership that renounces terrorism and violence, can yield great benefit for both parties. I sincerely want to believe that my esteemed Palestinian colleague does represent the moderates, in spite of the very distorted picture he felt compelled to draw today.

As we have seen, the extremists will do everything to break the coalition of moderates and destroy all prospects for peace. During the last month alone, Hamas fired more than 300 rockets at Israel, at least 23 of them Iranian-made Grad missiles that hit the city of Ashkelon, a quaint coastal city with a

population of 120,000. The rocket attacks marked an escalation of violence not just in number, but also in weaponry. Grad rockets — smuggled into the Gaza Strip from Iran during the breach of the Gaza border this January — have greater range and larger warheads, and they fragment on impact. Hamas' new weapon of choice means that a quarter of a million Israeli civilians now live in constant danger of rocket fire. We can all thank Iran for adding another weapon to the Hamas arsenal, in addition to its already heinous suicide attacks and deadly Qassam rockets.

Hamas and its terrorist-State backers bear sole responsibility for the escalation of violence. The Secretary-General rightfully told the Council at the meeting held earlier this month, "I condemn Palestinian rocket attacks and call for the immediate cessation of such acts of terrorism, which serve no purpose, endanger Israeli civilians and bring misery to the Palestinian people" (*S/PV.5847, p. 3*). Indeed, it is terrorism — plain and simple.

As Hamas unleashed its terrorism on the civilians of Ashkelon, it continued to wreak havoc and daily terror on the people of Sderot — a small but resilient city of 23,000 people where children no longer run around on playgrounds; they now run to bomb shelters. Such is the reality in Sderot, where 15 seconds is all you have to find safety before a Qassam rocket comes crashing down on you.

Though some wish to refer to the apparent lull in Hamas rocket attacks, I must warn that the perceived quiet is only on the surface. The bombs keep ticking, albeit quietly. The rockets out of Gaza have not stopped. Hamas is using this time to smuggle in and produce more rockets. Building rockets is not quiet. It is a silent promise — a promise of what is to come next: more terror and more violence, more extremism and more bloodshed.

In fact, we have seen the great lengths that the extremists are willing to go to in order to kill and maim Israelis. Just over two weeks ago, a Palestinian terrorist infiltrated the Mercaz HaRav rabbinical seminary in Jerusalem and ruthlessly gunned down eight young men, who were studying the Bible in the upstairs library. Eleven others were injured, many of whom remain in serious condition. The terrorist chose his target carefully; Mercaz HaRav is one of Israel's most revered institutions of Zionism and Jewish learning, and it is situated in the heart of Jerusalem, steps away from the seat of the Israeli Government and our most cherished democratic institutions.

As medical and rescue teams rushed to the scene, as the Israeli public heard the news of this appalling massacre, and as mothers and fathers were called to retrieve the remains of their slaughtered sons, the extremists in Gaza rejoiced at the spilling of Israeli blood. I am sure that many in this Council watched with horror and disgust as Hamas terrorists joyfully fired their rifles into the air and passed out candy to children in celebration. If anyone doubted what the extremists stand for, the reaction in Gaza to the murder of eight Israeli boys sets the record straight. It was also a stark reminder that those were the same people who danced on the rooftops after 9/11.

That is why it was so sad and disturbing that the Council could not condemn the terrorist attack, particularly in spite of your own very valiant efforts, Mr. President, and those of many other distinguished ambassadors on the Council. The Security Council has a longstanding practice of condemning terrorism, no matter the victims, no matter the location, no matter the perpetrator and no matter the motivation. Yet the Council could not unanimously condemn that terrorist attack and intentional killing of civilians, for the Council was blocked by a politicized opposition, by one Member State in particular.

The hypocrisy and cynicism displayed by that State, with its long history of terror, does not bode well for this Council and draws sad and alarming conclusions as to the screening process States undergo before attaining a seat on this august body. It was indeed a sad moment for this Council, but also one that should be a wake-up call to us all.

Lately, a particularly worrisome trend has become apparent when it comes to the discourse concerning our region. Some have a penchant for equating the lawful actions of States in defence of their citizens with the violence of terrorists whose goal is to endanger those very civilians. The misguided tendency to accept the status quo of terrorism, as expressed even by some United Nations officials in their statements and reports, is simply unacceptable. Such parity, which is often in the name of an ill-conceived balance, undermines the credibility of moderate States and their strength to bolster one another and isolate the extremists.

Israel goes to great lengths to ensure the safety and well-being of all civilian populations — Palestinians and Israelis alike. Whereas Israel makes all efforts to protect civilians in accordance with international law, Hamas indiscriminately fires rockets into Israeli civilian areas. Whereas Israel ensures that medicine and fuel enter the Gaza Strip to reach hospitals and needy civilians, Hamas hijacks those trucks and diverts them to its bomb-making factories and terrorist camps. Whereas Israel allows humanitarian convoys into Gaza — more than 1,600 trucks and over 20,000 tons of aid in recent weeks alone — Hamas cynically fires on those same crossing points, so it can fabricate a pretext for inciting the Palestinian public against Israel.

Moreover, the cruelty of Hamas continues to be seen in its holding of Gilad Shalit, who was abducted by that terrorist organization in June 2006 and begins today his twenty-second month in captivity. All the while, Hamas has refused to provide details of his condition or well-being. We continue to hope and pray for his safe return home.

Surely, no similarities can be drawn between Israel and Hamas. The immeasurable difference between the moderates and the extremists can be seen in both their rhetoric in this hall and their actions on the ground. In that context, I can only hope that my Palestinian colleague's poignant outcry against the deliberate killing of children, describing it as sinking into the abyss, was really directed at the Hamas terrorists he again somehow failed to mention by name. Let us be very clear: while for Israel every dead Palestinian child is a horrible mistake and a tragedy, for the terrorists, every dead Israeli child is a victory and a cause for celebration.

Allow me to briefly turn to the situation along our northern border. As you know, resolution 1701 (2006) changed the reality on the ground following the 2006 second Lebanon war and constituted an important achievement for this Council. Hence, the international community must ensure that the implementation of resolution 1701 (2006) remains a priority issue, and my delegation supports the Council taking the appropriate action to show its resolve.

In that context, I wish to draw attention to three main areas: first, stemming the illegal flow of weapons through the porous Syrian-Lebanese border; secondly, preventing the rearming of Hizbullah, which has already adapted its weaponry and tactics so as to take into account the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) presence south of the Litani River, as its spokesmen openly declare; and thirdly, the unconditional release of our boys, the Israeli soldiers Udi Goldwasser and Eldad Regev, kidnapped on 12 July 2006 by Hizbullah. The Council, in adopting resolution 1701 (2006), committed itself to seeing to their release, and I call on members to keep their word.

To be sure, the new and improved UNIFIL on the ground is doing important work, and, among the positives on the ground, Israel welcomes the trilateral meetings between the Israel Defense Forces, the Lebanese Army and UNIFIL, as well as efforts to demarcate the Blue Line.

However, as I began my statement referring to the dangers of extremism, here too it must be emphasized that Hizbullah poses an extremist threat to the region. Indeed, Hizbullah and Hamas share the same strategies and tactics and are funded and supported by the same ominous backers, Syria and Iran. The relationship between Iran, Syria, Hamas and Hizbullah are continually reinforced for us, as we recently saw in the expressions of sympathy and support made by those leaders, again just yesterday, regarding the arch-terrorist Imad Mughnieh.

Listen to the words of the terrorist leaders themselves, such as the Hamas commander in Gaza who recently told *The Sunday Times* newspaper that Hamas has "sent seven 'courses' of our fighters to Iran". According to the commander, a further 650 Hamas fighters have trained in Syria under instructors who learned their trade, techniques and ways in Iran. Sixty-two are in Syria right now. He said Hamas was modelling itself on Hizbullah. Clearly, Syria and Iran both play host to and support global and local terrorist organizations. The international community must press to end that support.

Israel understands it must work with the moderate, legitimate Palestinian Authority leadership to show the people of the region that the path of moderation will bring tangible benefit to all. That is why suspending the ongoing dialogue and talks between Israel and the Palestinians would be a grave mistake. The extremists have no real solutions to anybody's problems. All they want is to see our failure. Moderation must be seen as the only answer and legitimate alternative to extremism.

Israel knows it cannot accomplish this alone. It needs the support of like-minded moderate leaders in the region who understand the threat posed by the extremists — not just to us, but to them and the world — and are willing to do what it takes. This is a goal that all the moderates share. If we begin to show divisions and weaknesses, the extremists will take advantage of the indecision and hesitation.

The international community needs to strengthen the bilateral process between the two parties and to show a collective resolve to support the negotiations that will bring lasting security, stability and peace to all people of our region. That is the mandate of the international community. That is its calling; that is its duty.

This collective resolve must be shown, first and foremost, by this Council. We in Israel are committed to showing it each and every day, in partnership with the moderates around us, until moderation, modernity and common sense prevail.

Mr. Jurica (Croatia): Let me begin with words of thanks to the Secretary-General for his statement and to Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, Mr. Pascoe, for his briefing.

I would like to reiterate our full support for the Annapolis process, which offers the only realistic chance for peace. Despite recent difficulties, we are encouraged by the resumption of meetings between the two sides and by the recent high-level visits to the region.

The principle at the core of the peace process — the two-State solution, with a viable Palestinian State and a safe and secure Israel — should remain the ultimate goal for both sides. Any deviation from that course will eventually lead us away from that goal and will necessarily have negative effects on the outcome of the process.

As has been repeatedly stressed in our earlier debates this year, the peace process may also be imperilled by the absence of tangible improvements on the ground. We therefore welcome efforts to create a calm atmosphere conducive to negotiations and the implementation of the Road Map.

Actions such as the 6 March terrorist attack on a Jerusalem seminary — the very epitome of the Jewish identity — which we condemned in the strongest terms, are unjustifiable. Equally terrorizing is the launching of rockets into Israeli territory from Gaza by Hamas. Such acts, which give rise to the exercise of Israel's undeniable right to self-defence, are unacceptable and have to be brought to an end. Let me be clear — one cannot remain insensitive in the face of persistent and unapologetic armed provocations that threaten the security of Israel and its civilian population. Terrorist attacks cannot be justified under any circumstances.

However, Croatia shares the concerns raised about the serious humanitarian situation in Gaza, while being mindful of the circumstances that have contributed to creating it, namely, the violent takeover by Hamas last summer and its terrorist activities. We are nevertheless encouraged by Under-Secretary-General Pascoe's report on the improved importation of much-needed supplies into Gaza today.

We are aware that the present situation is negatively affecting the social and economic structure of Palestinian society and can also have a destabilizing effect on the peace process. We are particularly worried by the fact that even the relief effort is facing obstacles in a territory that is already heavily dependent on aid. We hope to see the early resumption of United Nations and other projects in Gaza, and we call on the parties to continue to work on the controlled reopening of Gaza crossings.

My delegation once again reiterates its view that only a permanent political settlement can fundamentally alter the economic and humanitarian problems faced by the Palestinians and bring lasting security for Israel. If some actors are allowed to continue with their destabilizing and terrorist attacks, the peace process will not be able to advance to its desired conclusion — a just and sustainable peace for both Israelis and Palestinians.

We continue to believe that 2008 is a decisive year for the Middle East. In particular, we hope that the parties will be able to reach a peace settlement based on the parameters agreed to in Annapolis. It is therefore crucial that the parties keep negotiating in good faith, thereby fulfilling their obligations under the first phase of the Road Map. International humanitarian law should guide the actions of all parties on the ground. No less important are the efforts towards Palestinian institution-building and economic reform.

Turning to Lebanon, let me stress that Croatia remains deeply preoccupied with the volatile political and security situation and lack of progress in overcoming the political paralysis in that country. In order to avoid the further destabilization of an already fragile Lebanese society, the convening of presidential elections should remain a priority.

The atmosphere of political uncertainty also remains an impediment for reaching the goals of resolution 1701 (2006), including those on disarmament issues. The continued allegations of breaches of the arms embargo, which Hizbollah does not deny, are disturbing, as is the recent bellicose rhetoric of its leaders. We condemn the continuing string of acts of intimidation and brutal attacks in Lebanon, which threaten the country's very sovereignty and its legitimate institutions. It is our belief that efforts to end impunity should be seen as an integral part of a sustained political process, and we salute the progress achieved thus far in setting up the Special Tribunal for Lebanon.

Mr. Ripert (France) (*spoke in French*): First of all, I would like to thank the Secretary-General for his introductory comments and to thank Mr. Pascoe for his presentation. Their statements underline the highly worrying character of the upturn in violence between the Palestinians and the Israelis in the past month. Once again, the civilian population has been seriously put to the test. Under these conditions, the most pressing need is the cessation of all violence.

First of all, France condemns all terrorist attacks, which seek to undermine the peace process. I am thinking here of the horrible attack perpetrated on 6 March against a seminary in Jerusalem; I also am thinking of the rocket attacks on the civilian population in southern Israel.

Moreover, France has condemned the recent Israeli military operations in Gaza, which, as the Secretariat emphasized, resulted in a large number of civilian fatalities, in particular women and children. In accordance with international law, Israel's legitimate right to self-defence cannot be objected to, nor can it be applied in a disproportionate or excessive manner.

The relative lull of the last few days is nevertheless encouraging, though it remains fragile. We support all efforts, in particular those of the States of the region, that could lead to a cessation of violence. The perspective sketched out by the parties themselves at Annapolis — an agreement on the establishment of a democratic, viable Palestinian State, living in peace and security side by side with Israel before the end of 2008 — is an objective that must be upheld and sustained. In addition to the end of violence, that will require confidence-building on the ground so that the Israeli and Palestinian populations will be able to see the positive developments affecting their daily lives.

In this regard, we cannot in any way ignore the situation in Gaza. First of all, a policy of cordoning off this territory and of collective punishment runs against international law. Moreover, it is contrary to bolstering the security of Israel. As will be stressed by the representative of Slovenia, speaking on behalf of the European Union, whose statement we fully align ourselves with, we demand that all crossing points into and out of Gaza be opened, be it for humanitarian or commercial activities. We note with satisfaction that the crossings have seemed less difficult for a few days now. We welcome this development and hope that it continues.

The European Union (EU) is ready to continue its follow-up mission in Rafah, in accordance with the November 2005 agreement on travel and access. All efforts aimed at facilitating a peaceful settlement of the crisis must be encouraged, as there is no military solution. For that purpose, we will undoubtedly have to hold discussions with Hamas at the appropriate moment. For their part, they must renounce violence, recognize Israel and respect the principles of the peace process.

The position of the international community on this issue is clear. First and foremost, the Palestinians, undoubtedly with the help of States of the region, must determine the conditions for a possible dialogue on inter-Palestinian reconciliation. In this regard, France welcomes the efforts undertaken by the President of Yemen, Ali Abdullah Saleh.

Beyond Gaza, we must continue to provide political and financial support to the Government of President Mahmoud Abbas and Prime Minister Salam Fayyad and their vision of the future Palestinian State. That was the objective of the Paris Conference last December, whose first fruits are beginning to be seen, in particular with regard to budgetary stabilization.

New impetus must be given to this approach. Donors must quickly meet their commitments, and the Palestinian Authority must pursue its efforts for the

rapid and comprehensive implementation of the reform plan that was announced. In this regard, we take note of the strong mobilization of Palestinians to stabilize public finances and their significant efforts to reform the security services. Finally, this means that Israel must improve the circulation of goods and persons, which, as emphasized by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, is a prerequisite for full economic recovery.

Today, as was recalled by Mr. Pascoe, the French Minister for Foreign Affairs is visiting Brussels, meeting with his Norwegian counterpart, with the European Commission and with Tony Blair for a second follow-up meeting to the Paris Conference. The upcoming Ad Hoc Liaison Committee meeting in London and the future conferences in Bethlehem and in Berlin are also part of the same approach, and we support them fully.

Finally and especially, trust on the ground and the very solidity of the Annapolis process will be measured by the ability of the parties to fulfil their commitments and obligations without delay, particularly with regard to the Road Map. We know the factors of this equation. The Palestinians must continue their efforts with regard to security and fighting terrorism. Israel must do more with regard to the release of prisoners and to progressively repeal restrictions on circulation in the West Bank. It must also put an end to all kinds of settlement expansion and must dismantle the illegal outposts.

In this regard, France deplores the recently announced extensions of certain settlements. The building of settlements should cease, for it is a major impediment to peace, prejudicing the final status. As the President of the French Republic recently said, we believe that colonization runs counter to the security of the State of Israel.

With the European Union, and particularly in the context of the Quartet, France will provide the American authorities all necessary help in their task of supervising the implementation by the parties of their commitments and obligations, as recalled at Annapolis. The international community must also support the parties in their efforts and help them to find creative solutions and accept difficult compromises on this road towards peace. On that road, the Security Council will have an important role to play.

We also reaffirm our support for the Arab Peace Initiative, which, like the Security Council resolutions and the principle of land for peace, is one of the foundations of a comprehensive settlement.

Before concluding, I would like to touch upon the situation in Lebanon, where the priority remains to emerge from the political stalemate.

We have noted the new delay, to 22 April, of the parliamentary session to elect the President. This situation is risky. A few days before the summit of the Arab League, where, we deplore, Lebanon cannot be represented by a President, France recalls and reiterates the support it has given from the outset, with the EU, for the Arab League plan as well as for the efforts of its Secretary-General. France reaffirms its support for a legitimate and democratically elected Government of Lebanon, in charge until elections are held. France recalls the importance for the parties concerned, within and outside of Lebanon, to demonstrate restraint and a sense of responsibility in the face of the tension generated by the political stalemate. Finally, France underscores the importance of the implementation of Security Council resolutions, in particular resolutions 1701 (2006) and 1757 (2007).

Mr. Arias (Panama) (*spoke in Spanish*): First of all, I would like to thank you, Mr. President, for convening this open debate. Allow me also to thank the Under-Secretary-General, Mr. Lynn Pascoe, for his briefing, which shows us that the cycle of violence in the region continues and that the peace process between Israel and Palestine has apparently not progressed.

Moreover, the last months have clearly revealed the inability of the Security Council to reach an agreement on this matter. Not only did we fail to adopt a resolution on the precarious humanitarian and security situation in Gaza that exists due to the Israeli measures, but we were also unable to reach agreement on a press statement condemning last month's terrorist attack on a Jewish seminary in West Jerusalem. We have to add here that the debates held in the Security Council every month on this issue do not seem to contribute in any way to the peace process. In this context, however, we must express our recognition and appreciation for the efforts undertaken by the Secretary-General for peace in the region.

We all know that a final peace agreement between the Israelis and the Palestinians must be based

on the existence of two States living in peace with each other and with their neighbours, within the 1967 borders.

The latest significant initiative in this regard was the Annapolis Conference organized by the United States, in which the world placed renewed hope. Unfortunately, at this time the Annapolis process seems to have come to a standstill and is at risk of collapse. That would have serious consequences for a region already threatened by new and even bloodier conflicts.

For Panama, the lack of progress is due, inter alia, to two overriding factors. On the one side is the apparent lack of political resolve on the part of the Israeli Government to commit itself to a genuine negotiating process that, given its nature, would require relinquishing certain aspirations and positions. On the other side are the profound political differences among Palestinians parties, which lead to the inability to reach agreements with a view to establishing a national unity Government that could advance the negotiating process. The announcement of a new dialogue between Hamas and Fatah, under the auspices of Yemen, augurs well in this regard, though we cannot ignore the results of similar, earlier efforts.

Finally, everything seems to indicate that in order to create an environment conducive to a genuine negotiating process with a view to attaining a lasting and final peace, we must, in addition to resolving the aforementioned obstacles, take the following measures in the shortest possible time. Israeli must immediately and unconditionally end the construction of settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories, including in West Jerusalem. Hamas must end its rocket attacks against Israel. Israel must end its incursions into occupied Palestinian territories and its siege of Gaza. Until these requirements have been met, all efforts for a peace process are doomed to failure.

There is nothing new in what we are saying. On the contrary, it is known by the majority, but it is not said by everyone here.

Mr. Ettalhi (Libyan Arab Jamahiriya) (*spoke in Arabic*): At the outset, I wish to thank you, Sir, for convening this meeting to discuss the situation in the Middle East. We also express our appreciation for the presence of Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon among us this morning and thank Mr. Pascoe for his valuable briefing.

I wish to endorse the statement made by the Permanent Observer of Palestine and that to be made by the representative of the Sudan as the leader of the Group of Arab States this month.

There is no doubt that the situation in the Middle East in general and the Palestinian question in particular has represented and continues to represent one of the most serious threats to international peace and security, if not the most serious ever. That threat has been considered by the Security Council for more than six decades now and has led to numerous wars and continual aggressive assaults and attacks that have caused the great suffering of which we are all aware. The examples thereof cited by Mr. Pascoe this morning are but a few among many.

Developments have led to us to pause and consider how the threat has become increasingly serious and expansive with passing time. And yet, the Security Council, entrusted by the general membership of the United Nations under Article 24 of the Charter with the principal responsibility for maintaining international peace and security, has failed to assume the responsibility referred to in Article 1 of Chapter I of the Charter. We must ask why the Council is pussyfooting and unable to address the issue. All I can hope is that the victims and perpetrators of the aggression are being kept in mind throughout such vacillation.

Once again, if any situation calls for the Security Council's attention, it is the question of Palestine. Whatever standards the Council applies in determining its priorities, that question should be foremost among them. If there is a threat to peace, the issue should be clear. Among issues with humanitarian and human rights dimensions, is there any suffering in the world worse than that of the Palestinians at the hands of the Israeli occupiers? The evidence lies in the six million refugees and displaced persons living on assistance in refugee camps; the 1.5 million under siege in the Gaza Strip with no way of earning a living, and we believe that the right to life is among the most sacred of human rights; and the more than 2 million people in the West Bank who are humiliated daily. Pregnant women die at Israeli checkpoints, of which there are more than 600; children are terrorized every day on their way to school; and workers are unable to get to their jobs. They are all exposed to death, detention and arrest at any time.

The Security Council surely knows that, even according to Israeli sources, 40 per cent of Palestinian young people in the occupied territories have been detained or arrested at least once. The Council surely knows that, since this issue was considered last month, the Israel Defense Forces has killed more than 150 Palestinians, among whom, as Mr. Pascoe noted this morning, were 36 children and a 60-year-old peasant who was driven to his farm by hunger. As all have heard, Israel has announced its resolve to launch a holocaust of the Palestinians, as noted by the Israeli Deputy Defence Minister, not to mention those who have been arrested and detained in Israel, about whose suffering we heard in this morning's briefing. Does the Security Council not see that the war crimes of the occupying Power and its determination to annihilate the Palestinians collectively represent an attempt to ethnically cleanse the population by making life unbearable for them in the West Bank? I would remind members of the Fourth Geneva Convention, which I believe is very well known to them all.

Since the Council last met on this issue, the Israelis have continued to expand their settlements and their Prime Minister has emphasized the fact that they will continue to settle. When reminded of the commitments he undertook at the Annapolis conference and in the road map, he said that the settlement activity is taking place in land annexed by Israel to its own territory and that there was no further need to negotiate since there was nothing to negotiate about. Worse yet, in recent days, the competent judiciary body authorized the Israel Defense Forces to kill those who protest against the separation wall and determined that even a peaceful demonstration is an appropriate justification for murder. At the same time, the Israeli courts decided to prevent Palestinians from using public roads in the occupied territories. What kind of racist discrimination or injustice could be worse than that? Israel's actions prove that it is not committed to peace and is striving to ensure the failure of the current peace process. Israel is an entity based on injustice, ethnic cleansing and massacre and cannot act against its own nature.

Those who insist on bringing the peace process to a successful conclusion have been the first to call on the Security Council to condemn the settlements and siege and on the Israelis at least to enunciate an intention to cease such activities, if only by pronouncement.

The situation in Lebanon is a source of concern to my country. The intervention of foreign Powers in that brotherly country has created a complex crisis in the political situation, whereby the Lebanese parties have been unable to elect a president of the Republic, leading to a political vacuum. My country supports the actions of the Arab League to help our Lebanese brothers to find a solution compatible with the Taif Agreement.

We are concerned about Israel's ongoing daily violations against Lebanese air space, territorial waters and territory, which were referred to in the latest report of the Secretary-General; its continuing attacks and acts of aggression, including abduction and killings, against people in the border areas; as well as the ongoing occupation of the Shaba'a farms and other Lebanese territory. We are also concerned about the deliberate obstruction of efforts to demarcate the Blue and Green Lines, including Israel's confronting the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon as it tries to demarcate those Lines.

That is further evidence of the fact that Israel disregards and flouts — and I have chosen the words very carefully — the resolutions of the Council, especially resolution 1701 (2006). I should once again like to draw the attention of the members of the Council to the document circulated by the Permanent Representative of Lebanon with regard to that matter. I believe that the Council's ongoing disregard of Israeli practices has the effect of undermining its credibility. It also leads us to conclude that the Council has double standards.

Finally, I should like to remind the Council of resolution 497 (1981), adopted more than 25 years ago. In that resolution, the Council underscored the fact that Israel's decision to annex the occupied Syrian Golan and impose its laws there was null and void and without international legal effect. Israel has refused to accept the resolution, has continued its policy of judaization, making life difficult for the Syrian population, and has attempted to attract immigrants from all over the world to populate the region. Syria has chosen a just peace as a strategic option in return for its territories occupied prior to 1967. But Israel has chosen to continue its occupation, to defy the resolutions of the Council and to violate the Fourth Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War.

In conclusion, Libya is honoured to say that it will always stand on the side of justice and condemn injustice and immorality in international law.

Mr. Le Luong Minh (Viet Nam): On behalf of my delegation, I would like to thank Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon for his presence here today and for his address to the Council. Among other things, the Secretary-General has addressed a concern that we share about the continuing violence. He has also emphasized the need for continued negotiations — which we support — to resolve the Middle East conflict. I would also like to thank Under-Secretary-General Lynn Pascoe for his detailed briefing. My delegation shares the views of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) that will be presented by the representative of Cuba on behalf of NAM.

The resumption of negotiations between Israel and Palestine on final status issues and the international efforts in the Middle East peace process did give us some hope of moving closer to a just, comprehensive and lasting solution to the Israel-Palestine issue based on the establishment of an independent Palestinian State living in peace side-by-side with Israel. Our hope, however, is being dimmed by the realities on the ground.

My delegation is deeply concerned about the deterioration of the situation in the occupied Palestinian territory, where Israel's military attacks and its construction of illegal settlements and the wall in the West Bank continue. We remain deeply concerned about the fact that, in disregarding the repeated appeals of the international community, Israel has not relaxed its restrictive measures in the Gaza Strip, which are being implemented in violation of international law, including international human rights and humanitarian laws, and which are taking an alarming toll in human lives, especially those of women and children, and great suffering to the Palestinian population.

While expressing our sympathy for innocent Israeli civilians killed, injured or otherwise harmed in attacks targeting southern Israel and other acts of violence, acts which Viet Nam has condemned and will continue to condemn, we cannot accept that this is being used to justify the illegal actions of Israel to which I have referred. By aggravating the already tense situation on the ground, those actions are endangering the limited positive progress achieved since the launch of the Arab Peace Initiative and the Annapolis and Paris Conferences.

Whether the first act or the response, violence only adds to the never-ending spiral of its own. We urge the parties concerned to exercise maximum restraint and abide by international law, including international humanitarian and human rights law. We call upon Israel to put an end to those actions and abide by the spirit of the relevant Security Council and General Assembly resolutions, in order to de-escalate tension and create an atmosphere conducive to tangible results in the negotiations it is engaging in with Palestine on final status issues, thereby bringing the Middle East peace process back on track.

In the light of the difficulties that the Palestinian people in the Gaza Strip are enduring as a result of restrictive Israeli measures, and while concurring with the Secretary-General's support for the Palestinian Authority's proposal to operate the Gaza crossings, we join the appeal to the international community, United Nations agencies and non-governmental organizations to extend to them the necessary emergency and humanitarian assistance.

My delegation takes note of certain positive developments that have been recorded in the implementation of resolution 1701 (2006), such as the tripartite cooperation between Israel, Lebanon and the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) to address key security and military operational issues, as well as the dialogues taking place between Lebanon and Syria on border delineation and demarcation. However, we are deeply concerned about the continuation of targeted attacks against Lebanese civilians and UNIFIL personnel, as well as about Israel's air violations and its occupation of the village of Ghajar, on the northern side of the Blue Line. We continue to share the concerns about repeated postponements of the presidential elections, the slow progress in the disarmament of armed groups, the lack of technical strike data of Israeli cluster munitions and the unresolved issue of Lebanese prisoners.

While we support the efforts undertaken by the League of Arab States and the Government of Lebanon to advance the political process, we urge all parties concerned to promote political dialogue and national reconciliation and to proceed to the presidential elections as planned. We continue to support resolution 1701 (2006) and call for its full implementation,

especially with regard to respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Lebanon, the protection of assets and the livelihood of civilians, and the safety and security of international peacekeeping and humanitarian personnel.

The Middle East has seen too much bloodshed. Continued violence will only make the people of the region — Arabs and Israelis alike — shed more blood. The Middle East conflict can only be solved through peaceful dialogue and negotiations in accordance with the principle of land for peace and the relevant resolutions of the United Nations, taking into account the legitimate rights and interests of all parties concerned.

I wish to reaffirm Viet Nam's support for the roles of the Quartet, the League of Arab States, the countries of the region and the United Nations, especially the Security Council, in the quest for a lasting solution to the Middle East conflict along those lines.

Mr. Urbina (Costa Rica) (*spoke in Spanish*): I wish to begin by thanking your delegation, Mr. President, for organizing a series of public meetings, which, we believe, is very welcome to the Council and to the Organization as a whole. I also wish to welcome the presence of the Secretary-General and to thank Mr. Pascoe for his report and the Permanent Observer of Palestine and the Permanent Representative of Israel for their statements. I believe both have provided important insights, and I welcome the opportunity they were given to address the Council. I believe they have further enriched today's discussion.

The Security Council has become part of the problems of the Middle East. That was seen clearly during the last few weeks when this organ — one of the fundamental bodies of the multilateral system — was unable to condemn the blocking of the Gaza crossings, which resulted in a desperate humanitarian situation. Nor was it able to condemn the killings that took place at a Jewish seminary in West Jerusalem. The Security Council cannot remain part of the problems of the Middle East. It should become part of the solution to the crisis in that region.

It is normal for the parties to the conflict to accuse each other, and it is equally normal for each to justify its actions as a response to the actions of the other. What does not seem normal, nor acceptable, is for this Council to serve as an echo chamber for either of the parties. That road will not lead us to the peace that everyone claims to want.

We insist that this Council withstand the logic of causation that the parties have invoked. We cannot continue to approve the actions of either, believing, like them, that those actions are only justified responses to an earlier grievance. If we continue along that track the Security Council will remain part of the problems of the Middle East. However, if we find the necessary determination to condemn every act of violence, whatever its origin, the Council will have started to become a means to resolve the problems of the region.

In turn, we must also change the ways the United Nations system considers and approaches the humanitarian situation of the Palestinian people. Their humanitarian crisis, the gravest since 1967, is not just the obvious result of war and displacement. While the Palestinian territory has been reduced to 22 per cent of the territory set out in General Assembly resolution 181 (II), the number of families assisted by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) has multiplied by ten over the last ten years. The Palestinian population have not been well served, and now we must adopt a vision that replaces the palliative care provided the international community. Only an approach that envisages the normalization of their lives can prevent catastrophe, an approach that offers them productive labour and that promotes their economic, social and cultural development — an approach, finally, that would prevent the great catastrophe that appears to be taking shape there.

What should be equally clear is the great responsibility that the Palestinian leadership holds in shaping an environment conducive to development. There will be no development without peace. Building peace in the Middle East obliges the Palestinian leadership to put an end to terrorist attacks, to convince the most radical elements and to integrate them into their political life, to ensure that those radical elements learn to live in keeping with the maxim of the Mexican national hero who recalled that among individuals, as among nations, respect for the rights of others is peace.

Moreover, countries that have supported either one of the parties to the conflict also bear great responsibility. We believe it is neither just nor acceptable for Palestinians and Israelis to spill their

blood using the resources and arms provided by others. That must end.

The Middle East must cease being the stage for the waging of a war that is supported from outside, a stop in the middle of an election campaign, or an obligatory visit for the leaders of the main Western countries. The international community must make decided efforts to forge peace in the Middle East. It must make a serious commitment, one that is met. One cannot live off promises such as those made at the Paris conference, many of which have not and never will become a reality.

Costa Rica is convinced that the international community has lost its way in the search for solutions to the situation affecting the Middle East. We have been unable to resolve the only crisis that has occupied this Organization for more than 60 years, and we are now divided between those who take one side to the conflict and those who take the other. Many nations that do not have a direct interest in the conflict are following the drama with anguish and are caught up in the destructive dynamic. Now, together, we must find the conditions that will make coexistence possible.

We said in earlier debates, and we feel obliged to repeat today, that it takes greater courage to agree than to disagree, that it is easier to raise walls that separate than to build bridges that unite. We consider constructive Yemen's efforts in opening a space for Palestinian dialogue, and we support the resolve of the Palestinians and Israelis to continue to negotiate in a highly difficult environment.

That is the only way. Costa Rica repeats its belief that we must leave behind, once and for all, the models of successive phases whereby one phase must be completed before moving on to the next. We call on the Israelis and Palestinians to address, as soon as possible, the final issues — negotiation of the borders and settlements, and the issue of refugees and their right to return and compensation, as well as the status of the city of Jerusalem. We do not seek to impose anything, as was agreed on in Annapolis by Mr. Olmert and Mr. Abbas in expressing their resolve to launch bilateral negotiations to reach a peace agreement that resolves all pending issues, including essential questions without any exception.

A few days ago we sent important signals concerning Lebanon. Now we must make clear our belief that once we find the road towards peace for Israel and the Palestinian State, it will be much easier to resolve the problems of Lebanon.

I would be remiss if I were to conclude without reiterating Costa Rica's belief that the membership of this Organization should be regularly informed in detail of the Quartet's activities. Since the Quartet involves some of the most important international protagonists and, for reasons that we do not understand, the Secretary-General participates in it on an equal footing with the other actors, we believe that our actions and decisions require the comprehensive and timely information I am calling for.

Mr. Natalegawa (Indonesia): I would like to begin by thanking the Secretary-General for his statement and Mr. Lynn Pascoe, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, for his briefing on the current situation in the Middle East.

This debate is pertinent as a forum in which delegations, particularly those of concerned countries from the region, and relevant organizations can reflect on ways to respond to the challenges of collectively bringing peace to the Middle East region.

The Middle East conflict has been going on for sixty years, and hope and despair have featured in every effort to end the conflict. The Annapolis conference is the most recent initiative aimed at ending a deadlock in the peace negotiations. It has injected a new vigour and has given new hope to the peace effort.

Yet, there is the risk of a disconnect between such hope and the situation on the ground. The cycle of violence has continued unabated. It has eroded confidence on both sides. Now there is an urgent need for rebuilding confidence. That will certainly require a complete end to violence. It will require immediate termination by Israel of all illegal activities, including the construction of settlements.

Compliance with international law by all parties must be promoted, and the utmost restraint must be exercised. Indonesia also shares the view of the Secretary-General, expressed during the Council's emergency meeting on the humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip held on 1 March 2008, that incidents in which civilians have been killed or injured must be investigated and accountability must be ensured.

Indonesia believes that achieving the Annapolis goals will pave the way for a more comprehensive settlement of the Middle East conflict. We therefore

welcome the resumption of Israeli-Palestinian peace talks on 17 March 2008, especially after a break of several weeks.

Indonesia also welcomes the forthcoming Middle East conference to be hosted by the Government of the Russian Federation. My delegation believes that the conference will provide a forum for strengthening the Annapolis process to achieve comprehensive peace in the region, including on the Israeli-Lebanese and Israeli-Syrian tracks.

Continued political and de facto divisions among Palestinians pose a particular constraint to unified efforts for the establishment of a sovereign and independent Palestinian State. We therefore continue to believe that an inter-Palestinian dialogue remains crucial.

The role of neighbouring countries in promoting inter-Palestinian reconciliation also remains important. The series of recent talks on inter-Palestinian dialogue within the framework of the Arab League or the initiative of individual neighbouring States is commendable. In that regard, my delegation is encouraged by the recent initiative of the Government of Yemen to promote inter-Palestinian dialogue.

The formation of a viable Palestinian economy is also key to the creation of durable peace in the region. We must, therefore, find ways to rebuild the devastated economy in the occupied Palestinian territory. In that regard, we underline the importance of the continued support and assistance of the international community, including the realization of pledges made during the Paris donors conference. Indonesia, together with South Africa, will convene later this year the Afro-Asian Conference for Capacity-Building of the Palestinian people, to be held in Jakarta.

Peace is of little value to someone who is dying of sickness or hunger. In the same vein, peace talks will mean nothing to a large part of Palestinians, who continue to live in harsh conditions. With nearly 85 per cent of the Gaza population relying on food assistance from the United Nations and other humanitarian agencies, the humanitarian situation in Gaza remains an issue of concern.

The freedom of Palestinians in Gaza from want and destitution must be immediately ensured. Thus, my delegation fully supports the work of the many United Nations agencies and other humanitarian partners on the ground. We also join the call of the Secretary-General on the international community to heed the consolidated appeal for Palestine launched in February 2008.

Humanitarian relief itself cannot address the suffering in Gaza as long as the Gaza crossings remain closed. My delegation therefore continues to underline the importance of the opening of the border crossings into Gaza permanently and without delay to facilitate the passage of imports and exports and the access of humanitarian workers to the area. Full implementation of the Agreement on Movement and Access is critical, particularly in view of the impact of crossings on the Palestinian economy and daily life. We also welcome the proposal made by the Palestinian Authority to assume responsibility for the Palestinian side of the Gaza Strip's border crossings and encourage contacts between Israel and the Palestinian Authority to act on that proposal.

With regard to the situation in Lebanon, peace and stability in the country are essential, not only for the Lebanese themselves, but also for all peoples in the region. Thus, the continued political impasse and repeated postponements of the presidential election remain issues of concern to my delegation.

Prolonging the constitutional void in Lebanon will be harmful not only to internal stability but also to the democratic process. It must, therefore, be avoided. While efforts exerted by the international community and regional States are of paramount importance, the final resolution of the internal conflict will be at the hands of the Lebanese people. We therefore stress the urgency of concerted efforts being made by all parties concerned in the country to end the political deadlock and build a consensus that leads to the election of a President.

The Middle East conflict has been for far too long tarnishing what our time could offer in creating a peaceful and liveable region. It has for far too long been wearing on the parties of the region. Finding a peaceful, just, lasting and comprehensive settlement to the conflict will thus be absolutely critical. Indonesia is committed to such an endeavour, on the basis of the relevant resolutions of the Council, including resolutions 242 (1967), 338 (1973) and 1515 (2003), the Madrid terms of reference, the principle of land for peace, and the Arab Peace Initiative.

Mr. Kafando (Burkina Faso) (*spoke in French*): We would like to begin by thanking the Secretary-General for his introduction and the Under-Secretary-General, Mr. Pascoe, for his presentation on the situation in the Middle East.

In a few days, in Damascus, a summit of Heads of State and Government of the Arab League will be convened. We hope that the summit will be a decisive stage in the search for peace and will help to ease the suffering endured by the Palestinian people.

As we are now well aware of the situation in the region, which is a direct consequence of the confrontation between Israel and its neighbours, we are especially concerned by the humanitarian tragedy still experienced by the population of the occupied Palestinian territories, in particular Gaza. We therefore reiterate our call to Israel to take a humanitarian approach and put an end to the siege of Gaza.

We must also, however, underscore the collective fear under which the Israeli population lives, with rockets being launched from Palestinian territories. The Palestine Authority, in our view, should exercise all its rights over its territories.

We have always stated that it is, first and foremost, the two parties, Israel and Palestine, that must create suitable conditions for dialogue and negotiations. In that respect, we feel encouraged by the recent meeting in Sana'a, held under the aegis of the Government of Yemen, of the two main Palestinian factions, which have promised to engage in dialogue.

We also welcome the resumption of the Palestinian/Israeli negotiations. However, we fear that the continued construction by Israel of the wall of separation and the expansion of its policy of settlement in the Palestinian territories, including East Jerusalem and the occupied Syrian Golan, could affect these negotiations.

In Lebanon, another theatre of conflict, the Secretary-General's last report (S/2008/135) notes the repeated Israeli violations of that country's air space, and thus of the provisions of resolution 1701 (2006). Such a situation is most disturbing, and of course of concern to the Security Council.

Moreover, and on the basis of resolutions 1680 (2006) and 1701 (2006), we wish to see a resumption of the work of the Commission charged with delineating the Syrian-Lebanese border in order to resolve the thorny issue of the borders, including that of the Shebaa farms.

We are forced to note, however, that unfortunately all these solutions seem far off as long as the political and institutional impasse affecting Lebanon has not been resolved, in particular by the election of a president of the Republic.

The overall situation in the region, the complexity and seriousness of which are keenly felt by all of us, calls for speedy and concrete actions by the international community, and especially by the Security Council.

The inability of the Council to enforce its resolutions is obvious and could, in the long run, undermine its credibility. That is why, as we have already stressed, the Security Council should consider innovative, bold and pragmatic solutions that can assist in the achievement of progress by ending the deadlock.

One thing is clear — only a comprehensive approach, with the participation of the main stakeholders, both from within the region and beyond, can establish the basis for lasting peace in the Middle East. That is the reason why my country believes that the consideration of the Arab Peace Initiative, which calls for the immediate implementation of the provisions of resolutions 242 (1967) and 338 (1973), could also serve as a significant step in a fair resolution of the Middle East situation.

Sir John Sawers (United Kingdom): I apologize to colleagues for missing much of the earlier debate. I was attending the commemoration of the International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade in an adjacent room.

I would like to begin by expressing my gratitude for the briefing that the Council received earlier. I will study it and the speeches we have heard closely.

At the end of 2007, we all spoke of a window of hope in our common efforts to achieve a two-State solution in the Middle East. Some cautioned against allowing this window to close since it might be the last opportunity. We need to get back to a level of optimism. With political will, we can stop the window from closing. All of us need to encourage an early resumption of negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians and to secure visible progress from these negotiations in order to bring the focus back to the political process. It is the political process that offers

the only prospect for a solution and peace in the region. We look to Prime Minister Olmert and President Abbas to continue to demonstrate strong leadership in search of peace at a difficult time. We look to them to resume negotiations at the earliest opportunity.

As part of the Quartet, the United Nations has a responsibility to influence the peace process, to encourage both sides to take difficult but necessary steps. That can only be done through a balanced approach, as far as possible achieving consensus here in the Security Council.

Broader support for the peace process, in particular in the region, is also invaluable. We welcome the international community's continued efforts, including the recent visit by United States Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and the Yemeni initiative to support intra-Palestinian dialogue.

The situation on the ground, and in particular in Gaza and southern Israel, is of great concern to my Government. We have been deeply saddened by the civilian casualties on both sides. The United Kingdom unequivocally condemns the incessant rocket attacks against Israel and the appalling attack on the seminary in Mercaz Harav. Measures in response must be in accordance with international law and not cause suffering to innocent civilians. We look to the Israeli authorities to achieve that objective.

Both sides have obligations under the Road Map. It is important that each side takes steps to meet these obligations without waiting for the other to make the first move. The Palestinians must address Israeli security concerns, making visible efforts on the ground to arrest, disrupt and restrain those who conduct and plan violent attacks on Israelis.

Israel should freeze all settlement activity, including the natural growth of existing settlements. The United Kingdom considers that Israeli settlement building anywhere in the Occupied Palestinian Territories is illegal under international law. That includes settlements in both East Jerusalem and the West Bank.

The humanitarian situation in Gaza remains of grave concern. Essential services, including water and sanitation, are close to breakdown, and a number of essential medical items and drugs are out of stock.

The United Nations should support efforts to open Gaza crossings. We in the European Union are ready to redeploy our border assistance mission at Rafah at the earliest opportunity.

A long-term solution to the situation in Gaza must address both Israeli security and Palestinian hardship. That can only come from a political process. The efforts of the international community must be in support of the Annapolis process in order to achieve this objective.

In addition to our ongoing humanitarian support, the United Kingdom continues to address the economic and development needs that are vital to political progress. The Bethlehem investors' conference will take place with our support in mid-May, and it is our hope that that will lead to real improvements on the ground. The Ad Hoc Liaison Committee will meet in London at the beginning of May in order to coordinate donor activity and provide a clear demonstration of international support for the Annapolis process.

I would also like to make a couple of points on Lebanon. The Government of Lebanon needs the support of the international community. The continued political impasse and insecurity in Lebanon are a major concern. The United Kingdom continues to support the efforts of Amre Moussa, the Secretary-General of the League of Arab States, to promote a solution.

All countries with influence in Lebanon, in particular Syria, must play a constructive role. The Arab League summit in Damascus this week marks an opportunity to make progress. We urge Syria, as hosts, to take the steps necessary for a resolution in Lebanon to be reached, and we urge all actors in the region to work in the interests of stability and democracy in Lebanon.

Sustained United Nations engagement is crucial. That includes the implementation of all Security Council resolutions on Lebanon and the Secretary-General's continued leadership. The United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon continues to play a vital role in providing security in the south. Once again, the United Kingdom is grateful to the troop-contributing countries for the work they are doing alongside the Lebanese armed forces.

Mr. Spatafora (Italy): At the outset, I also wish to express my very sincere appreciation for the presence here of the Secretary-General and for his

thoughts and assessments. I think that it is a very important sign of the commitment of the United Nations as part of the Quartet. I also thank Under-Secretary-General Pascoe for his very comprehensive, as always, briefing that gives us the feeling of where we are.

Italy fully aligns itself with the statement that will be delivered shortly by the Presidency of the European Union. Let me just add a few remarks.

We strongly support the effort that President Abbas and Prime Minister Olmert have undertaken to move the bilateral negotiations forward despite the difficulties of a fragile political context and the highly volatile situation on the ground. I think that the questions that the Secretary-General asked truly capture what should be in all of our minds — If not now, when? If not this, what? I think that these are the questions that the players should keep in mind at all times.

As has already been mentioned by the Secretary-General, negotiations are the only way to achieve peace. In this regard, we emphasize once more the importance of the facilitating role played by the Arab States, and we welcome as well the support given by the Arab League to the good offices carried out by President Saleh of Yemen to reactivate the indispensable inter-Palestinian dialogue.

Looking at the situation from the ground — and I think that more and more we have to look at it from that perspective — we believe that it is increasingly urgent to show the first dividend of the negotiations to the public opinions of the two parties and of the countries in the region. It is indispensable that measures be adopted rapidly to improve the lives of the Palestinian people by easing restrictions on their movements and removing checkpoints in the West Bank.

It is essential that conditions be created to reinvigorate the Palestinian economy on the basis of the Palestinian Reform and Development Plan adopted by the Fayyad Government. To this end, we support the efforts of the Quartet representative, Tony Blair, and urge all donors to concretize the financial pledges they announced at the Paris Conference.

We also believe that the Palestinian Government efforts to strengthen its public security apparatus should be supported. Italy therefore supports the German initiative to convene a conference on rule of law and intends to contribute to the consolidation of the operative capacity of the Palestinian civil police through the European Union Coordinating Office for Palestinian Police Support and urges other countries to do the same.

In this framework, Italy is particularly concerned about the Israeli Government position to continue building in East Jerusalem. We wish to reiterate that the building of settlements in occupied Palestinian territories, including in East Jerusalem, is illegal under international law. The continuation of settlement activity in the occupied territory is currently a threat to the bilateral negotiations. It seriously weakens the credibility of the Palestinian leadership in the view of its public opinion while strengthening arguments of the extremists and enemies of peace.

Finally, we express support for the monitoring role being played by the United States, in particular the convening on 14 March of the first trilateral meeting provided for by the Annapolis Conference. It is important for those meetings to become an instrument available to the parties to give greater depth to the dialogue.

Now, just a few remarks on Lebanon. As are others, we, too, are deeply concerned by the lack of signs of progress towards a solution to the political crisis. Together with the European Union, we support the mediation initiative of the Arab League and the efforts of its Secretary-General. We hope that the upcoming Damascus summit will mark a turning point in the crisis.

It is important, above all, to avoid any further deterioration of the security situation, which could lead to a very dangerous escalation of violence. The Lebanon crisis has to be resolved first and foremost through a mature assumption of responsibility by the Lebanese political forces. We are convinced, nevertheless, that action has to be taken at the regional level in an expanded strategy that takes into account the multiple actors involved, along with their aspirations.

In this context, we are pleased with the progress made in the establishment of a special tribunal on the Hariri assassination and the financial support received thus far and the prospect of the tribunal actually beginning operating.

Finally, we reiterate the importance of the continued presence of United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) for the stability of Lebanon. We encourage the Lebanese armed forces and the Israeli Defense Forces to consult with UNIFIL to find solutions to the problems on the ground and to continue efforts for the demarcation of the Blue Line.

We took note with special attention of the most recent report of the Secretary-General (S/2008/135) and its recommendations which we support, in particular on what concerns a new mission of the Lebanon Independent Border Assessment Team.

Mr. Kumalo (South Africa): Let me begin by thanking the Secretary-General for having come to this meeting earlier and Mr. Lynn Pascoe for briefing the Security Council on this very important subject.

My delegation aligns itself with the statement to be delivered later today by the Permanent Representative of Cuba on behalf of the Non-Aligned Movement.

Let me also commend you, Mr. President, for convening this meeting in the open format, which allows affected parties and the relevant regional groups to participate. My delegation has always held the view that the Security Council should be more transparent and that issues such as the debate on the Middle East should be held in an open format so as to allow all relevant role-players, including the general membership of this Organization, the opportunity to address the Council on this conflict, which has plagued us for more than 60 years.

A month ago we heard briefings by the Personal Representative to the Secretary-General, Mr. Robert Serry, and by Mr. John Holmes, the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator. Those briefings presented a bleak outlook on the peace process between Palestine and Israel, as well as on the humanitarian situation in the occupied Palestinian territories. Sadly, that situation has not changed. In fact, as we have just heard, the situation has further deteriorated in the last month. Innocent civilians on both sides continue to suffer the consequences of the elusiveness of peace.

In spite of what we may have heard, the problem in the Middle East is the occupation of Palestine. An occupation that has gone on for 40 years is the fundamental issue to be addressed, and until we address the illegal occupation of Palestine, we will not succeed in making progress in resolving this intractable issue.

Clearly there is a disconnect between the quest for a peaceful solution to the conflict in the Middle East and the actual situation on the ground, including what is being done by the international community to address that situation. The optimism that we all felt after the meeting in Annapolis and the Paris pledging conference is unfortunately dissipating.

The situation in the occupied Palestinian territories is deteriorating daily. In the West Bank, the continued expansion of illegal settlements, military posts, check points and the separation wall already undermines the prospects for achieving a viable and contiguous Palestinian State and is in clear violation of United Nations resolutions and the Road Map. The expansion of illegal settlements in Jerusalem, in particular, predetermines a solution on the future of Jerusalem, which should be the basis of a negotiated solution.

Regarding the surge in the building of those illegal settlements, we wish to recall the recent statement of the Secretary-General, who, on 10 March 2008, expressed his concern over the approval by the Government of Israel of a resumption of construction of 750 housing units in the West Bank settlement of Givat Zeev. The Secretary-General stated that any settlement expansion is contrary to Israel's obligations under the Road Map and, indeed, to international law. He called on the Government of Israel to halt settlement expansion and reiterated that the fulfilment of Road Map obligations by both parties is an important measure underpinning the political process between them.

The military offensive by the Israeli Defense Forces in Gaza and the total blockade of Gaza have further exacerbated the humanitarian tragedy. This Council's inability to condemn what is occurring in Gaza or even to express concern at the situation is indeed unfortunate and further creates the impression that the Security Council is once again ignoring the plight of innocent Palestinian civilians who live under occupation.

Israeli measures make life unbearable for Palestinian civilians, are an affront to human dignity and are also a clear violation of international law. Even United Nations personnel and the local diplomatic

community are subjected to these daily hardships, humiliations and provocations.

The South African Government has consistently condemned attacks on civilians, whether Palestinian or Israeli. We have argued that the continuous rocket attacks from Gaza into Israel cannot be justified in the name of the Palestinian cause. Indeed it is against the interest of the Palestinian people and only results in military retaliation by the Israeli Defense Force. We condemn attacks such as those that occurred at the seminary in Jerusalem, which resulted in the killing and injury of innocent civilians.

South Africa believes that, for progress to be made in the talks, the Palestinians need something tangible to convince them that a negotiated peace can lead to the establishment of a Palestinian State based on the 1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital.

Finally, my delegation continues to believe that the peace process resuscitated at Annapolis presents a meaningful attempt to find a lasting solution. The parties and the international community cannot sit back and allow the situation on the ground to continue deteriorating, ending all hopes for a negotiated two-State solution. The primary responsibility for peace and security lies with the parties. In that regard, it is crucial that their actions and pronouncements be calculated to advance the quest for peace.

Mr. Khalilzad (United States of America): Allow me to join my colleagues in thanking the Secretary-General for addressing the Council earlier and Under-Secretary-General Pascoe for his update.

The United States continues to work to support progress towards an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement before the end of 2008. Vice President Cheney and Secretary Rice each visited the region earlier this month to encourage progress in negotiations and on the ground. Secretary Rice will return to the region later this week to continue her discussions with the parties.

When we last met, we were rightly concerned about the escalation of violence in southern Israel and Gaza caused by an increase in terrorist rocket attacks by Hamas that led to an Israeli military response in self-defence. Subsequently, on 6 March, a terrorist gunman opened fire at a Jewish religious school in Jerusalem, killing eight young Israeli students and wounding 11 others, which the United States and many other Governments rightly condemned as a vicious targeting of innocent civilians.

As we recall those events, let me make clear that the United States deeply deplores the death of all innocent civilians. In the wake of that tragedy, which Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas unequivocally condemned, the United States supported the Government of Israel's courageous decision to reaffirm its commitment to negotiations. Israeli and Palestinian leaders continue to meet to work towards the shared goal of a permanent status agreement. Constructive regional and international support that enjoys the support of the parties for their efforts remains crucial.

With that in mind, I would like to make two additional points. The first is the need to achieve progress on the ground in order to create an atmosphere supportive of the negotiating process and to reassure Israelis and Palestinians alike of the seriousness of the process. General Fraser, who leads the United States efforts to monitor progress on road map implementation, has just returned from the region, where he convened a trilateral meeting with the parties to assess progress and discuss next steps to fulfil the parties' commitments under the road map. The General had a frank and positive exchange with the parties and is working with them to promote progress in that area. Secretary Rice will use her next round of meetings with Israeli and Palestinian leaders later this week to further encourage progress.

The second is the critical importance of support from the international community to ensure that Palestinian humanitarian needs are being met and that nations are following through on their pledges from the Paris donor conference. Those efforts will help President Abbas and Prime Minister Fayyad build the institutional capacity and develop the economy that will serve as the foundation for a Palestinian State. For our part, the United States continues to provide basic humanitarian assistance to Palestinians living in Gaza through ongoing United States Agency for International Development programmes and annual contributions to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).

The United States is the largest bilateral donor to UNRWA. In fiscal year 2007, we contributed over $154 million to UNRWA and we have to date pledged

$148 million in 2008. Our contributions to UNRWA support its provision of basic and vocational education, primary health care, and relief and social services to over 4.4 million registered Palestinian refugees in Gaza, the West Bank, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria, as well as its provision of emergency food, health, job creation and other relief services to Palestinian refugees in the West Bank and Gaza.

We are also moving forward with assistance programmes utilizing the $545-million pledge for assistance to the Palestinian Authority that Secretary Rice announced in Paris last December. Most recently, on 19 March, we signed a cash transfer agreement with Prime Minister Fayyad, providing $150 million in budgetary support to the Palestinian Authority. Much more is needed, and we encourage Paris conference participants to urgently provide the assistance they have pledged. We look forward to reviewing progress in that area at the upcoming meeting of the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee. We welcome Tony Blair's continuing leadership role in that area, including his involvement in planning the 21-23 May Bethlehem private sector investment conference. We also support Germany's proposed meeting later this spring to focus donor support on building the capacity of the Palestinian justice sector.

Turning to Lebanon, I would like to thank the Secretariat for the efforts under way to rapidly facilitate the work of the Special Tribunal. We look forward to the update on the Tribunal scheduled for Thursday. I urge all Council members to generously support the Tribunal as a clear signal that the international community backs the effort of the Lebanese people to end the era of impunity for political assassinations in their country.

I would like to underscore our deep concern about illegal arms transfers across the Syrian-Lebanese border, and in particular claims by Hizbullah that it has replenished its military capacity since the 2006 war. We fully support the Secretary-General's call for a process to disarm all militias in Lebanon in accordance with resolutions 1559 (2004) and 1701 (2006) and the Taif Accords. In accordance with those resolutions, Hizbullah must disarm, and it must do so now.

Finally, I would like to reiterate our concern that it has not yet been possible for the Lebanese to hold a presidential election. Although the Lebanese agree on a candidate, Syria and its allies within Lebanon are using other preconditions to perpetuate the political stalemate. It should be clear, however, until a new president takes office, the United States has full confidence in and fully supports the legitimate Lebanese Government in managing the affairs of the State and the Lebanese armed forces in continuing to provide security.

Allow me to conclude my statement by offering a brief comment on the format of this monthly meeting. Since 2002, it has been the practice of this Council to have regular briefings on the developments in the Middle East. Yet the polarization and divisions of the United Nations membership over the conflict all too often manifest themselves as heated political statements in both the General Assembly and the Security Council that do little to help advance the cause of peace or help the Palestinian people in any tangible way. It has long been the conviction of the United States that a solution will be achieved only by direct negotiations between the parties, facilitated and supported by constructive international engagement. That is why the bulk of our efforts are focused on making a difference on the ground. If these types of meetings do not contribute to that effort — or, worse, if they fuel the tensions that impede constructive engagement — then we need to ask ourselves whether the public format of debates in New York truly helps to create the environment necessary to facilitate the pursuit of the two-State solution. I therefore urge my colleagues to use these meetings to promote the cause of peace and the pursuit of the two-State solution.

Mr. Verbeke (Belgium) (*spoke in French*): I would like to thank the Secretary-General for his introduction at the beginning of this meeting. I would also like to express my gratitude to the Under-Secretary-General for his briefing.

Belgium associates itself with the statement to be delivered by our colleague from Slovenia in his country's capacity as President of the European Union.

The Israeli and Palestinian peoples are living through a very trying time, which has aroused concern among Belgian officials. Given the impact of the escalation of violence on the civilian populations of Israel and Gaza, Belgium has reiterated its resolute condemnation of Palestinian rocket launches. While acknowledging the right of Israel to defend itself, my country's officials have joined the Secretary-General in condemning the disproportionate nature of Israel's

response. Moreover, along with its European partners, Belgium has unreservedly condemned the terrorist attack against Yeshiva Mercaz Harav on 6 March 2008.

There are reasons for both hope and despair in the current diplomatic situation. As far as the elements for hope, we should commend the political courage of President Abbas and Prime Minister Olmert, who, while continuing dialogue, have not allowed violence to destroy the bilateral negotiations process launched at Annapolis.

While leaving it up to the parties to negotiate the parameters of a final settlement, it is incumbent upon the international community to support their efforts. In that connection, Belgium regrets that, despite its repeated efforts, the Security Council has not been able to play its role in condemning violence and encouraging diplomacy.

We welcome the first meeting organized between the parties by General Fraser. Whatever will there may be on the part of the Palestinians and the Israelis to reach a solution, we must admit that, more than ever before, the absence of progress on the ground will undermine the political process. Belgium therefore encourages the Quartet and its Representative, Tony Blair, to support and complement the efforts of General Fraser to help the parties to implement their respective commitments, beginning with those under the Road Map and the Agreement on Movement and Access.

Although they may appear to be difficult to implement, that difficulty pales in comparison with the price the Palestinians and Israelis will have to pay if the peace process becomes bogged down once again. The urgency of this matter has led the international community to become deeply involved. Its commitment was evidenced at Paris last December, and will once again be on display on the security and economic fronts at the upcoming conferences to be held in Bethlehem and Berlin.

Nevertheless, those efforts will be productive only if they complement those of the parties. It is for that reason that we launch an urgent appeal to Israel to halt the expansion of existing settlements, dismantle illegal outposts and gradually lift obstacles to movement in the West Bank. We call on the Palestinian Authority to intensify its efforts in the area of security, including by proceeding to restructure its security forces and to dismantle terrorist infrastructure.

With regard to the situation in and around the Gaza Strip, Belgium welcomes the peace that has prevailed in recent days, as well as the partial reopening of the crossings at Kari and Sufa. As for Hamas, which has de facto control over the Gaza Strip, the current calm must urgently be followed up by concrete steps to assume its responsibilities towards the Palestinian population, and that of Gaza in particular. We therefore demand that Hamas put a complete end to the launching of rockets, restore the rule of law, which the Palestinian people deserve, and return control of the Gaza Strip to the sole legitimate control of the Palestinian Authority.

In that regard, and given the serious humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip, Belgium reaffirms the readiness of the European Union to facilitate the implementation of a solution that makes possible the reopening of crossings for humanitarian and commercial purposes.

I should like to conclude by saying a few words about Lebanon. Regardless of the obstacles encountered, Belgium would like to reiterate its unreserved support for the mediation efforts of the League of Arab States and its Secretary-General, Mr. Amre Moussa. We hope that in the days remaining before the holding of the Damascus summit, all parties will be able to assume their responsibilities and make a constructive contribution.

The seventeenth postponement of presidential elections should not deter us from goals that all of us know are crucial to stabilizing Lebanon and the whole of the region. We would like to reaffirm our support to the Lebanese Government and armed forces. Pending a resolution of the current issues through the resumption of a national dialogue, those institutions have been able to ensure the unity, sovereignty and independence of Lebanon. We also support the efforts of the Secretary-General to implement all aspects of resolution 1701 (2006) on the basis of the deployment of Lebanese forces and the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon south of the Litani River. The political process set out in August 2006 includes all the elements necessary to guarantee Lebanon's sovereignty and stability in an atmosphere of lasting peace.

Mr. Liu Zhenmin (China) (*spoke in Chinese*): The Chinese delegation would like to thank you, Mr. President, for convening this open meeting on the question of the Middle East. We would also like in

particular to thank the Secretary-General for his presence today, as well as for the statement he has delivered. Moreover, we wish to thank Under-Secretary-General Pascoe for his briefing.

The situation in the Middle East has changed drastically in the past month. The armed conflict in Gaza has resulted in enormous casualties among the civilian population. At the moment, the situation has eased somewhat. Nevertheless, it continues to be very fragile and threatens to result in an escalation of the conflict at any moment. It is our hope that the parties can take advantage of this very unusual respite and redouble their efforts to ensure a comprehensive and lasting ceasefire as soon as possible. That would be conducive to ensuring security for both sides, as well as normal lives for the Palestinian people.

China appreciates the efforts made by Egypt to that end. We hope that the parties concerned will demonstrate flexibility, genuinely renounce violence and militancy and commit themselves to dialogue and negotiation on an equal footing in order to resolve the problem.

China welcomes the pledge made by Israel and Palestine to continue political negotiations. We hope that both sides will be able to overcome every distraction and speed up the negotiating process through concrete actions. Both parties should avoid any actions that might poison the atmosphere for negotiations. Recently, Israel announced its decision to expand settlements. That is not conducive to building up mutual trust.

We welcome the efforts made by Yemen to promote direct dialogue between the various factions in Palestine. We also welcome the fact that the two major factions have signed agreements and are continuing dialogue and consultations. As we have always emphasized, strengthening the internal unity of Palestine is a very important precondition for the success of the political negotiations between Israel and Palestine, which will eventually lead to the realization of a comprehensive peace. The international community should also continue to provide Palestine with assistance, help the Palestinian authorities enhance their capacity-building and improve the livelihoods of the Palestinian people. That would be conducive to consolidating the support of the Palestinian people for the negotiation process.

The Middle East peace process is faced with very serious challenges at the moment. The process launched in Annapolis has already made an important first step. But it is also faced with various kinds of obstacles. The international community must think in depth about how to inject new vitality into the Annapolis process. We support the ideas of the Russian Federation concerning the holding of a follow-up meeting to Annapolis. We are confident that efforts for preparations and to allow all concerned parties to participate will not only help to consolidate the achievements of the negotiations, but will also create similar conditions for broader and deeper negotiations in the next stage.

Syria-Israel and Lebanon-Israel negotiations are also important components of the Middle East peace process. Launching negotiations on those two tracks at an appropriate time and making progress on them will help to achieve a comprehensive peace in the Middle East. We hope that the parties concerned will provide more support to the negotiations on those two tracks.

The presidential election in Lebanon has again been postponed. The political and security situation in Lebanon has been tense. That has highlighted the importance of maintaining stability and an early solution to their political differences. We support the continued efforts of the Arab League to find a solution to the political crisis in Lebanon, and we hope that all the parties in Lebanon will put their national interests first and adhere to dialogue and consultations to resolve their differences and seek consensus.

The President (*spoke in Russian*): I will now make a statement in my capacity as representative of the Russian Federation.

We are grateful to the Secretary-General, Mr. Ban Ki-moon, for his statement and presence at today's meeting. We also thank the Under-Secretary General, Mr. Pascoe, for his briefing on the situation in the Middle East.

Today the Middle East is living through an especially critical time. The tasks facing the parties to the peace process are many. They must be resolved in a situation in which a definitive end to violence continues to elude us. That is something that we consider to be an unconditional priority.

Of special concern is the recent situation concerning the settlement of the Palestinian-Israeli

question. Our utmost efforts should be aimed at ending the deaths of peaceful Palestinians and Israelis, putting an end to the firing of rockets at Israeli territory and lifting the Gaza blockade, which has become absolutely intolerable.

The Russian Federation provides and will continue to provide economic and financial assistance to the Palestinians and is assisting in the strengthening of the Palestinian security forces. Those topics and others were addressed during the recent visit by our Minister for Foreign Affairs, Sergey Lavrov, to the region.

We consider it especially important that, regardless of the aforementioned problems complicating the peace process, President Abbas of the Palestinian Authority and Prime Minister Olmert remain committed to furthering dialogue and implementing the agreements reached at Annapolis and that they agree, by the end of the year, on the parameters for a final settlement. No less important is the parties' strict compliance with the part of the Annapolis agreement that reaffirms the obligation of the parties to implement the Road Map, including the necessity of refraining from any actions that could undermine the reaching of a final status settlement. In that context, we are quite clearly disturbed by the continuing Israeli settlement activity. We call for a complete freeze on that activity in accordance with the demands of the Quartet.

Russia is committed to the concepts and principles of the peace process and is trying to visualize the Middle East as a region of peace and stability, where all States, including Israel, live in security, in conditions that are optimal to resolving socio-economic problems and in the closest possible cooperation with one another.

To achieve that objective, the efforts of the international community to mobilize support for the Annapolis process and ensure its success must be stepped up. To that end, we are conducting active consultations with the Quartet, regional and United Nations partners and other interested parties to achieve a preliminary understanding on the convening in Moscow of an international meeting on the Middle East. We hope that in the very near future we will be in a position to determine its conduct, schedule and agenda.

In Annapolis, agreements that enjoyed everyone's support were adopted. We must now confirm that support by prompting Israelis and Palestinians to implement those agreements effectively.

It is also important to create the necessary conditions to achieve progress on the Syrian and Lebanese tracks of the Middle East settlements.

When Palestinian and Israeli negotiations lead to results — and we hope that that will come about very soon — an unavoidable issue will be how those agreements will be viewed by all Palestinians. That is why the restoration of Palestinian unity is something that we view as especially important, and we welcome the agreements achieved between Fatah and Hamas representatives in Sana'a on the resumption of inter-Palestinian dialogue. It is important that from the very outset those initial contacts be constructive and focus on the key problems facing the Palestinian people: how to restore the political and legal integrity of the Palestinian territories' and the parameters for the dialogue process with Israel. We hope that many of those problems will be discussed in depth and will possibly be resolved at the upcoming Arab League summit, to be held in Damascus.

To conclude, I would like to say a few words on Lebanon, which is again gripped by unrest and where extremist groups are stepping up their activities and all political factions are building up their forces. Russia is a firm champion of unswerving compliance with the provisions of resolution 1701 (2006) and other Security Council resolutions that prohibit the supplying of arms to any irregular groups in Lebanon. We continue to support the constitutional order of Lebanon and its legitimate institutions, sovereignty and political independence. We advocate a speedy election of a new President. It is our deeply held believe that all members of the international community should adhere to such a position.

I now resume my functions as President of the Council.

I have a number of other requests for the floor on my list of speakers. I therefore intend to suspend this meeting until 3 p.m.

The meeting was suspended at 1 p.m.